

11.20.2007 - Senator Byrd: A Lesson in History

U.S.

Senator Robert C. Byrd has just celebrated his 90th birthday, a milestone not only for him, but also for our state. Throughout his life, he has made a considerable difference for the people of this country and in the process he has provided an example of a fruitful life of public service and personal accomplishment.

Quick

to urge young people to study history, telling them that they must understand the past to be prepared for the challenges of the future, Senator Byrd, himself, is a valuable history lesson that can provide inspiration and insight to our leaders of tomorrow.

Born

Cornelius Calvin Sale, on November 20, 1917, to a struggling couple, he was too soon taken from the arms of his loving mother, after she fell victim to the devastating influenza epidemic. The loss of his mother separated him from his siblings and from his father, a man with talented hands and an honest heart, when he was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in the coalfields of southern West Virginia. There his name was changed and so was the course of history.

The

man we know today as Senator Robert C. Byrd did not enjoy a life of privilege and money. He had a hardscrabble childhood, graduating from school in the height of the depression, when jobs were few and incomes were tenuous. His jobs as gas station attendant, butcher, and even as a riveter, working on Liberty ships, were not the kind typical of political leaders of this day, when campaigns are expensive and increasingly financed from a candidate's own deep pockets. His ability to overcome his own poor beginnings and considerable obstacles serves as inspiration to anyone who has ever felt limited by a small bank account or a big hurdle.

When

Robert Byrd entered politics he had little to depend upon but his own enthusiastic determination, a good political mind, and the fiddling skills that helped draw crowds to hear his stump speeches. He had no college degree, though he took college courses whenever and wherever he could for the sake of learning and improving himself. Then, when he became a Member of Congress and found himself surrounded by lawyers, he took an unusual and difficult route to earn a law degree at night. Senator Byrd reminds us by his own example that gaining an education is an admirable goal, and one that is an ever-evolving, life-long pursuit.

In both his public and private lives, he has been guided by the old values he learned growing up in the West Virginia hills, reading the Bible, and listening to his "old Mom's" prayers, offered up in dim lantern light. And his devotion to Erma Ora James Byrd, his beloved wife of nearly 69 years, is legendary. In fact, he remains devoted to his "closest confidant" and soul mate, even today, while she watches over him from Heaven. Senator Byrd's life encourages us to follow the teachings of the Creator and to make the well-being of our families a priority because in these things, not material wealth, lies success.

In the U.S. Senate, Robert C. Byrd has seen presidents and vice presidents, senators and congressmen, come and go. He has seen the big and the small, the powerful and the meek, the great and the want-to-be-great. He has watched men, full of hope, come to the Congress and build long successful careers in public service. He has seen ambitious men leave public life, sometimes frustrated. Through it all, his love of the U.S. Senate and his faith in our Constitutional form of government have never wavered.

Even in the tough times, in the wake of legislative defeats, in the face of cynics and critics, he has worked tirelessly for the betterment of our state and the people of this nation, reminding us that a thing worth doing is a thing worth doing well.

From his youthful days of coal camp life and the depression era, through his climb to the pinnacle of governmental power, the life of Senator Robert C. Byrd has been and remains an inspiration to me and to so many others throughout West Virginia and across the nation. I join with my fellow West Virginians, his colleagues, his family and his friends, in expressing gratitude for all that Senator Robert C. Byrd has meant to us throughout his 90 years. And now, we enthusiastically await all we have left to learn and gain from this remarkable man in the years ahead.